

2019 10 06 – A Mustard Seed

Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to Jesus “increase our faith!” It’s easier to understand this request if we look at the context of today’s scripture passage. In the previous verses, the scripture tells us that Jesus was teaching his followers about forgiveness. He had instructed them, “If they sin against you seven times a day, and seven times a day turn back to you saying, “I’m sorry,” forgive them. Jesus had also been warning his disciples not to put stumbling blocks in the way of others. He said, in a dramatic fashion, “Those people would be better off thrown into the sea with millstones around their necks, than to make one of these little ones stumble.” Jesus’ closest followers were questioning whether they had the ability to do what Jesus was asking. They were worried and possibly even afraid. So the apostles said to Jesus, “Increase our faith!”

I’m sure we have all had times in our own lives when we have questioned our abilities, when we have wondered whether we could do what needed to be done, when we have worried whether we had the strength, the skill, the faith to get us through. Maybe it was the first time that you stood in front of a classroom as a student teacher, maybe it was the year your father decided you were ready to drive the combine, maybe it was the September when, as an adult, you went back to school to get your degree, maybe it was the first time someone asked if you would convene a funeral lunch for 200 people or maybe it was time you were asked to visit someone in the hospital.. We’ve all had times in our lives when we have questioned our own ability to cope.

When the apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith, he answered, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Uproot yourself and plant yourself in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

Let’s start with that first phrase, “If you had the faith the size of a mustard seed”. It sounds like Jesus is questioning whether his disciples have any faith, doesn’t it? But that’s not what he is saying. It turns out, that in the Greek language there are two different words that translate to “if.” There is one that would imply that the disciples had no faith but that’s not the one that Jesus is using. The word that Jesus is using would be better translated: “If you have the faith of a mustard seed, and you do.” Jesus is telling his disciples that they have faith. He is telling his disciples that they have all the faith they need.

You see faith is not something that can be quantified. There is no ‘more’ or ‘less’ in faith. Faith is being open to the power of the sacred, to the power of the Essence of Love. In her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, Brené Brown says,

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.

Faith is being open to the sacred power of love that already exists within and around each one of us. Steve Garnass-Holmes describes it this way:

Faith is no superpower;
it isn't a substance with quantity.
Faith is trust in God,
openness to the power inherent in what is.

Faith is being in the grip of the gravity
of God's grace.
It's the gravity that does all the work,
and no one is without it.

Faith is a tiny, weak finger
willing to flip the light switch of God.

Faith is whatever the bird knows
of feather, of wing, of air.

Faith is allowing light to shine,
lungs to breathe, God to love.
www.unfoldinglight.net

Faith, we all have it! So the next question is, what do we do with it? Jesus assured his disciples that even faith the size of a mustard seed would allow them to do great things, things that they couldn't do on their own. But as Garnass-Holmes points out, having faith is not about having superpowers or being heroes. Having and using our faith is about listening and following God's call in our lives. It's about accepting who we are and what we have to offer and allowing our own light to shine. It's about being God's servants in the world.

And this leads us to the next part of today's scripture passage:

"If any of you had hired help plowing a field or herding sheep, and they came in from the fields, would you say to them, 'Come and sit at my table?' Wouldn't you say instead, 'Prepare my supper. Put on your apron

and wait on me while I eat and drink. You can eat and drink afterward'?
Would you be grateful to the workers who were just doing their job?"

Jesus is describing a situation that would have been very common in the First Century. He is talking about slaves or indentured servants. This particular translation uses the words, "hired help," but other translations are nearer to the original Greek in their use of slave or servant. You see, in Jesus' day slavery was the norm. The people listening to Jesus would have been nodding their heads and thinking, "Of course slaves are expected to both work in the field and prepare supper. They're just doing their jobs and deserve no gratitude."

We, of course, in our 20th century world no longer condone slavery or even servanthood. We now have unions and labour laws that protect the rights of the worker. It is difficult for us to accept this type of treatment as the norm. But this made sense to Jesus' disciples, his apostles. They had no trouble identifying with a slave owner or a servant master.

But Jesus then turned this image on its head. He said,

"It's the same with you who hear me. When you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, "We are simple workers. We have done no more than our duty."

Yikes, it's a lot easier to identify with the master than it is with the servant, isn't it?

Jesus is telling his disciples that the important issue here is not how the boss

treats his or her employees, but rather how the worker or servant understands their role. He is telling his disciples that they should be dutiful servants and Jesus is telling us that we should be dutiful servants too.

Jesus is, of course, referring to our relationship with God. God, the Essence of Love, the Holy Mystery is our boss, our master. Jesus is talking about our faith in God's power. Jesus is telling us to listen to our heart and to follow God's call in our lives, to accept who we are and what we have to offer and to allow God's light to shine through us.

No matter what we are called to do: teach, farm, go back to school, convene a lunch or even visit someone in the hospital. Jesus is telling us that we are God's servants in the world. We do God's work not because we expect gratitude or reward, but because it gives our lives meaning. And we are able to do this work because we have faith the size of a mustard seed.